

Exploring Children's Picture Storybooks with Adult and Adolescent EFL Learners

When I told my colleagues I had packed a few children's picture storybooks for my teaching assignment abroad, they said, "Your students won't be interested in American picture storybooks. Too childish—save your luggage space for more important books!"

With my training as an English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) teacher and twenty years' experience with all ages on two continents—and a second twenty as a teacher educator preparing language arts and reading specialists for American schools—I was on my way to Rwanda. It was 2010, and I was asked to teach **British** and American literature at the Kigali Institute of Education, Rwanda's premiere teacher-training tertiary-level institution. This was a critical moment for the country's national language policy. One year earlier, the Rwandan government had announced that English would replace French for teaching and learning at the primary through

tertiary levels, effective immediately. I was expected to teach in English, and I anticipated that my students' English-language proficiency would vary greatly. There would be Rwandan students who grew up learning French and Rwandans who were returning from years as refugees in Anglophone countries.

As an EFL/ESL teacher, I knew I could draw guidance from theory and research in second language acquisition, bilingualism, and cross-cultural communication, and from my professional knowledge and expertise. I also knew I wanted to engage my students and balance the goals of teaching English language mechanics and literature. I also wanted activities that isolated and blended the primary skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

My EFL training did not include the use of children's picture storybooks, but my work in teacher education did. In recent years I had urged my EFL teacher friends to explore the

use of children's books in their classrooms. Why not bring a few along, I thought, just in case I had a chance to try them myself?

This article offers a definition of children's picture storybooks and presents a theoretical framework to support their use in teaching EFL to adults and adolescents. It presents ways to use these books and address the twin goals of teaching mechanics and culture, and it includes a list of books and a wide variety of activities that EFL teachers can use to effectively teach adult and adolescent learners using such texts.

Characteristics of picture storybooks

Typically, children's picture storybooks are books with pictures and text that, together, tell a story, with a theme appropriate for children. Words alone are not enough for the story to be understood. Pictures alone also tell only part of the story. It is the interaction between the visual and the verbal that defines this genre.

The narrative of a good children's book flows with a steady rhythm that makes it an excellent read-aloud. Voices of the characters convince and appeal to readers. The plot entices them to turn the pages nonstop from beginning to end. These texts are short, usually less than 500 words long.

The quality of the illustrations is equally significant. "Good" illustrations convey movement, emotions, and/or humor. They hold readers' interest, supplying elements of the story that do not appear in print. The illustrations are works of art created using a wide variety of media. They might be simple charcoal sketches, watercolor or acrylic paintings, mixed-media collages of found objects and torn paper, or mosaics of colored tissue paper or broken glass. Whatever the medium, children's book illustrations create a bond between the reader's eyes and ears.

Authors of the first recognized children's books were renowned scholars in the field of education. John Amos Comenius is credited with being the "father of modern education," and John Newbery is identified as the "founder of children's literature." *Orbis Pictus* (Comenius 1777) and *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (Newbery 1744) launched the concept of storybooks with illustrations for children.

Through the years, children have grown up with such classics as *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak 1963), *Goodnight Moon* (Brown 1947), and the many books of Dr. Seuss. The genre includes fiction, nonfiction, and format variations such as wordless picture books and graphic novels. Wordless picture books use only pictures or illustrations to tell stories, and graphic novels use words and pictures or illustrations that follow in sequence, similar to cartoons.

Rationale for using picture storybooks

My rationale for using children's picture storybooks to teach EFL is interdisciplinary. It includes theory and practice in second-language acquisition, content- or theme-based instruction, social learning theory, and contemporary literacy, including digital literacy.

Krashen (1982) theorizes that language experiences help learners acquire language. Classroom activities designed to offer such experiences engage students in the use of natural, meaningful, and functional language (Gee 1998). Storybooks offer a wide array of such language. Depending on the story and the author, the language may be authentic, contextualized, funny, playful, predictable, and filled with repetitive language patterns.

Content-based instruction and theme-based units are an important focus of EFL teaching. Activities structured around content or theme can be particularly interesting for adult and adolescent EFL learners if the content or theme has meaning for them. Brinton (2003), Horn (2011), and Shin (2007) note the usefulness of content-based instruction for language acquisition because it stimulates students who want to learn about other topics in addition to language. The plethora of picture storybooks almost guarantees that appropriate ones can be found for whatever content or theme students want to explore.

Beginning with ancient cultures, stories and storytelling have been used the world over as classic tools for teaching and learning. These tools maintain and express cultural values and history. They are social in nature, requiring storyteller and audience to interact. The use of storybooks in teaching is an extension of this tradition, and their use in EFL classrooms can have powerful consequences (Mixon and Temu 2006).

In today's world, research and theory are expanding the definition of language learning to include not only reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills but also viewing and representing (Egbert and Hanson-Smith 2007; Gee and Hayes 2011). Although the field has yet to reach consensus on the term that best encapsulates these skills—some use *multiliteracies* or *multiple literacies*, while others use *new literacies*, *twenty-first-century literacies*, *digital literacy*, or *contemporary literacies*—it is critical that EFL teachers integrate these new viewing and representing elements in their work. Today English-language teaching and learning can no longer be restricted to print on paper. Students must be able to read, write, speak, listen, view, and represent meaningful texts that may include words, images, movement, and sounds. Students must be able to use these new texts to gain meaning, think critically, and communicate thoughtfully to construct new ideas (International Reading Association 2009; Leu and Kinzer 2000). Wherever possible, EFL teaching and learning should include viewing and critical analysis of text/print, color, pictures, icons, photographs, graphics, movement, sound, and music. Students must learn to communicate using a multiplicity of tools.

When instructors have little or no access to technology or print resources, picture storybooks can help them introduce and blend the skills of viewing and representing. In settings where the Internet and technology are available, EFL teachers can use picture storybooks to introduce the important roles that color, shape, design, and texture play in comprehension and communication.

Language, storytelling, and culture

In EFL classrooms, exploiting the astounding array of language structures in picture storybooks can help students with the mechanics of English. For example, some books use a call-and-response format that encourages student choral responses. Others use a variety of past tenses, offering opportunities for lessons that compare and contrast grammatical structures. Language structures and vocabulary can be effectively supplemented with the right picture storybook.

The important elements of storytelling, including character development, setting, plot, and resolution, can also be taught through this genre. Some stories include persuasive and cause-effect narratives that teachers can take advantage of to move into more academic-style writing. Other stories can serve as models for a wide variety of literary devices such as alliteration, personification, metaphor, and simile.

In much the same way that Rucynski (2011) argues for the use of the long-running U.S. television series *The Simpsons* because it is an American cultural icon, I make a similar argument regarding children's picture storybooks. These books offer insights into everyday cultural issues and include subtexts, conflicts, or multiple perspectives on broader cultural concerns. Teachers can use these books to raise questions and open up conversations that require adults and adolescents to use language that is natural and meaningful. Children's picture storybooks reveal differing beliefs, profound conflicts, and memorable historical personalities and events.

Using storybooks with adults and adolescents

Ghosn (1997) reminds us that children learning EFL/ESL benefit from using carefully selected children's literature. Older students will also benefit from these books.

Several theories, when intertwined, offer an interdisciplinary rationale for the use of these texts with older learners. Because these books are written for native speakers, they offer EFL learners opportunities to interact with authentic English phrases and idioms, which is critical to language acquisition (Gee 1998). Because it is the nature of such texts to stimulate interest (Ghosn 1997), their use may lower the affective filter (Krashen 1982). High-quality texts offer experiences with natural, meaningful language and introduce students to vocabulary and language structures that are less complex and texts that are relatively short. All of these elements help with language acquisition (Krashen 1982).

Although there is scant research in the use of these texts with EFL adult and adolescent learners, the work of Ho (2000) and Reid (2002) is significant. Ho (2000), who

engaged in a three-year study using these texts with adult English language learners in the People's Republic of China, found that when students used these texts, their confidence in reading and their oral language practice increased. Reid (2002) found that the cultural and linguistic information in these texts, including vocabulary and contemporary English expressions, appealed to older ESL learners; because the themes in children's picture storybooks can be extremely profound and provocative, she noted that older learners were easily drawn into discussions. The key was to select high-quality books (Ho 2000; Reid 2002).

Selecting high-quality children's picture storybooks

To successfully incorporate children's picture storybooks in EFL teaching of adults and adolescents, instructors must carefully choose books for their content, taking into account language and culture, illustrations, and, most importantly, message and theme. To this end, teachers should use books that combine universal themes that are linguistically and culturally accessible to the students they teach.

The following three resources can assist teachers with selecting high-quality books:

1. Books that receive national or international recognition are important to consider. In the United States, the Association for Library Service to Children (2013), part of the American Library Association, gives widely respected children's book awards each year. The Caldecott Medal is given to the artist of the most "distinguished" children's picture book. The Batchelder Award is presented to a publisher for the most "distinguished" book written outside the United States in a language other than English and then translated into English. The Belpré Award honors a Latina/Latino author and illustrator who best portray the Latina/Latino experience of children. The Coretta Scott King Award honors an African American author and illustrator who contribute to the promotion of the American dream in a "pluralistic society."

2. Teachers must be mindful to select books that do not promote racism or sexism. The pamphlet "10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism" is available online (California Department of Education 2001). It offers specific guidelines that teachers will find extremely useful.
3. A third resource is the independent booksellers who specialize in children's books. For example, New York City's Bankstreet Bookstore carries children's and young-adult books, offering "hand-picked" selections on their website. The store manager and their extremely knowledgeable staff are available to help via phone and email.

By using these resources, teachers can be confident in finding high-quality books that will help students learn English, inform them about American culture, and offer inspiration—potentially for a lifetime.

Linking storybooks to themes

Storybooks can be used to teach themes related to philosophical or lifestyle issues ranging from the role of women around the world, to social justice concerns, to global warming. The possibilities of linking high-quality children's picture storybooks with themes are limited only by teachers' imaginations—and knowledge of the books. In this section, I describe three possible themes.

Gardening

Begin the theme of gardening (McIntosh 2011) with a study of trees (Al-Khaja 2007). Complement this study with *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa* by Winter (2008). This picture-story biography of Kenya's first female Nobel Peace Prize winner is told in the present tense and describes Wangari's childhood near Mount Kenya, her studies in the United States, and her return to Kenya. Vividly depicted in words and boldly colored illustrations are Wangari's defiance of the Kenyan government's attempts to cut trees and her efforts with local women as they successfully work to reforest large areas of her homeland. Readers follow Wangari's evolution from determined schoolgirl to nonviolent activist. Winter's note at the end offers readers additional information about this female

activist. Building on Al-Khaja's lesson with the modal *can*, students might create questions and answers about what Wangari "can" do at various stages of her life while learning about this important woman.

Students know that planting is not just a rural activity, and McIntosh (2011) describes trends in urban gardening. Expand on this information with *The Gardener* (Stewart 1997), a Caldecott Honor Book. Set in a Depression-era American city with a determined young hero named Lydia, this story tells, through letters she writes home to family in the Midwest, the ways in which Lydia transforms her uncle's sad, gray neighborhood by creating a vibrant roof garden. Illustrations change from earth to jewel tones, offering readers hints of the story's conclusion. Vocabulary in this book supplements McIntosh's (2011) "Garden Glossary." The text's epistolary format offers teachers much to exploit in terms of genre and culture. Here, too, is a strong female character.

A third gardening-theme book links gardening and New York City. In *The Curious Garden*, Brown (2009) tells of the abandoned railway line along the southwest side of Manhattan and its transformation into a dynamic urban park, the Highline. This little-known story, told through the eyes of a curious young boy, moves through the four seasons. Colorful illustrations help readers visualize the changes brought to the neighborhood. The author's note gives additional information about the Highline, this newest public park in New York City. The text, for intermediate-advanced speakers, includes gardening vocabulary and conditionals. Toward the end, the garden is personified, adding to the sophistication of this high-quality children's picture storybook. This book can also serve as a bridge to the theme of New York City.

New York City

Selected children's picture storybooks play an important role in opening up safe spaces for authentic teaching and learning about difficult topics. Librarians and therapists call this *bibliotherapy* (Lehr 1981).

One topic that lends itself to bibliotherapy is the World Trade Center attack in 2001. I suggest that EFL lessons about New York City give students the opportunity to converse

about this event, painful though it might be, by reading and discussing the books described below.

In his simply written account, *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, Gerstein (2003) tells the true story of Philippe Petit's 1974 daring tightrope walk between the two towers of the World Trade Center. Gerstein includes facts and figures that make for marvelous interdisciplinary activities that link language and the role that mathematics played in this remarkable event. For example, each tower was one quarter of a mile high. Teachers might have students convert this length into meters or compare this distance on the ground from one classroom to another or one location to another.

Detailed illustrations earned this book the 2004 Caldecott medal and include two foldout pages that capture the imagination of readers, regardless of their ages. The language and artwork make this text accessible to a wide variety of EFL language levels, while content keeps advanced English speakers—and teachers—engaged. After reading this book aloud, teachers may find that discussions will wind their way into a conversation about 9/11—or maybe not. Gerstein's text makes no mention of 9/11, but the omission may prompt questions, freeing teachers to respond in whatever way they feel comfortable.

Continuing with the New York theme is *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* (Kalman 2002). An explicit look at 9/11, this is a true story about the decommissioned fireboat that rescued many people off of the southern end of Manhattan on that fateful day. Framed between 1931, the year the boat was built, and 2001, when its service was heralded as an example that "heroes never die," the story of the *John J. Harvey* and the people who commanded her are poignant and vividly depicted. Tidbits of New York City history from 1931, when Snickers candy bars were first sold, combined with the events of the *John J. Harvey*, reveal the simplicity and complexity of American culture. Despite some nautical vocabulary, the clear illustrations help readers gain meaning. The abundant use of past-tense action verbs provides teachers with wonderfully vivid language that students will find useful.

One more book not to be missed is *14 Cows for America* (Deedy 2009). This true story tells about one Kenyan community's response to 9/11. Set in Naiyomah's home region, this clearly told story respectfully depicts his Kenyan community by using vivid colors in broad, sweeping illustrations that add visual poignancy to this heartfelt story. Author notes at the end offer additional information. Told in the simple present, the story is accessible to a wide range of EFL levels because the theme is universal. If employed creatively, New York, 9/11, and Kenya can prepare EFL adolescents and adults for another important, universal theme: respect.

Respect

To explore this theme, begin with the amazing, true story of Owen and Mzee, a tale based on the tsunami of December 26, 2004, about a baby hippo and an old tortoise. This story offers hope in the face of tragedy and teaches respect in the face of difference.

As is often the case with true stories, several authors wrote books about Owen and Mzee. When multiple authors approach the same story through different formats, teachers can use all or some of the books—particularly where there are mixed EFL ability levels—and create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the texts. In the case of Owen and Mzee, Winter (2006) uses a twenty-eight-word text and simplistic illustrations with bright colors to tell essentially the same story that Hatkoff, Hatkoff, and Kahumbu (2006) tell, except the latter use photographs, sophisticated vocabulary, and complex language structures. Either format will inspire classroom conversations filled with curiosity and questions, both natural and meaningful.

To follow up on animal stories and the theme of respect, teachers should consider *Stellaluna* (Cannon 1993), the fictional account of a baby fruit bat who falls into a nest of baby birds. As the babies eat, grow, and learn how to survive, they try to adopt each other's habits. The baby bat hates eating insects but has no other choice. Then there is the question of sleeping. The baby bat sleeps upside down, and the birds do too, until Mama Bird intervenes. The story ends when the baby fruit bat is reunited with its mother.

Although they appear to be photographs, the illustrations, accurately rendered with acrylic paint and colored pencils, give life to the story in humorous and poignant detail. Themes of respect and acceptance, adaptation, and individuality will give students much to discuss. The author's endnote includes facts about fruit bats.

Mr. George Baker (Hest 2007) has universal themes about senior citizens around the world who are wise, but illiterate, and want to learn to read. The tale, set in small-town America, presents Mr. Baker, who is one hundred years old, and his friend Harry, who is eight. They wait for the school bus to take them to school, where they both learn to read—Mr. Baker in a classroom with adults, and Harry in second grade. Woven throughout are phrases that make for excellent choral reading: "See this _____, see that _____." Adults will be entranced with Mr. Baker, who dances with and kisses his wife in front of Harry. In addition to using accessible language, this text will prompt questions about American culture: Mr. Baker is black, Harry is white; they ride a school bus together, and they are friends. This touchingly simple story is filled with opportunities to talk about small-town life, race, and intergenerational relations.

It was my experience with *Little Blue and Little Yellow* (Lionni 1995) that inspired me to write this article. I used this book on a whim with my first-year college students in Rwanda. Although these forty-eight students were predominantly French speakers who needed to improve their English quickly because of the new language policy, their language ability levels were extremely diverse. Most of the French speakers grew up in Rwanda or were returnees from the Francophone diasporas of Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; they struggled to learn English in the still predominantly Francophone environment that existed in Rwanda. Others were near-fluent English-speaking Rwandan returnees from the Anglophone diaspora of Uganda.

It was a Friday afternoon, and I wanted my students to relax and enjoy English before I dismissed them after another intensive week of study. As I pulled out the Lionni book, I was quite certain that very few, if any, had ever seen a children's picture storybook.

Judging from the students' reactions when they saw the cover, my assumption was correct.

"What do you think this story is about?" I asked, showing them the cover. After collecting a lovely long list of predictions, I turned the page and showed them the side-by-side pages of blue and yellow dots, in alternating rows, covering both pages. Laughter and astonished faces filled the room. Now they sat attentively, waiting to see what the next page would reveal.

Little Blue and Little Yellow (Lionni 1995) is a simple, Romeo and Juliet-type story but with less animosity between the "blue dot family" and the "yellow dot family." One day, the little blue dot and little yellow dot play together, and when they hug before returning home, they become green. Their parents' anger at this change in color prompts the little dots to cry. The parents realize what happened when they see the tears sort themselves back into the respective primary colors. Then, the two families come together and hug. Everyone turns green. The themes of friendship, difference, respect, parental obedience—and disobedience—raise profound questions. This 278-word text is simple: "This is little blue Here he is at home ..." (Lionni 1995). But the message is complex. The simplistic illustrations made from torn pieces of blue, green, yellow, black, blue, orange, and red paper capture the essence of the story.

The theme of respect can be explored with carefully chosen children's picture storybooks. By using these texts, teachers help their students learn language and reflect on themes that are relevant in and out of the classroom.

Author study projects

In addition to studying the language, content, or theme of children's books, students can examine works written by the same author to better understand the author's life and writing. Discussions can include genre and illustration styles, characters, settings, use of color, drawing style, and white space on pages.

As an example, we need look no further than the aforementioned writer Jeanette

Winter, who has written several works in addition to the Wangari book, including *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* (Winter 2005). As the Iraq war reaches Basra, a librarian, Ali Muhammad Baker, saves more than thirty thousand priceless books with the help of friends and neighbors. The language style and illustrations in this book are similar to those in the Wangari story. Another book is *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* (Winter 2009), about a young girl's determination to get educated. *The Watcher: Jane Goodall's Life with the Chimps* (Winter 2011) is about this renowned primatologist. Finally, in *My Name Is Georgia: A Portrait by Jeanette Winter*, Winter (1998) tells, using an autobiographical format, the story of the remarkable American artist Georgia O'Keeffe.

Using well-crafted texts with authentic language, the study of children's picture storybook authors can enrich EFL teaching and learning for adults and adolescents. Presenting meaningful, culturally informative and themed content prompts students to use authentic language for meaningful communication.

Teaching with children's picture storybooks

As demonstrated above, activities for listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing are easily developed with picture storybooks; however, the approach and techniques used with adults and adolescents are at times similar to and at other times different from those used with children.

Begin by presenting the book cover and title. This provides opportunities for students (of all ages) to engage immediately with the story. Asking students to use the illustrations and title to make predictions and reflect on the story allows them to speculate about the setting, characters, and plot. Consider the possibilities with *Pink and Say* (Polacco 1994). As students offer predictions the teacher writes them on the board. In beginner classes, teachers can record the exact words of students. For example, Maria says, "It will be about two boys." The teacher can ask Maria to add, "I

predict” and then call on an intermediate-level student to convert Maria’s prediction into reported speech.

Teachers can follow up with, “Why do you think [this book will be about two boys]?” This activity creates the potential for a story to unfold before the real story begins. A list of five to ten predictions is enough to start.

Next, teachers should read the title, author, and name of the publisher. If the author(s) has a dedication, this should be included. An excellent example of why it is important to read the dedication is *Pink and Say* (Polacco 1994). If readers skip this, they will not know that this story is based upon one that the author’s family passed down through generations, and that it is a true story set in the U.S. state of Georgia about a black boy who helps a white boy, a Polacco family member, during the Civil War.

Now it is time for teachers to read the story aloud, doing so in much the same way a parent might read to a child at bedtime; however, teachers should pause whenever there is information that supports or refutes student predictions so that they can make comments. As teachers continue reading, they should check for comprehension and encourage more predictions and discussion about the story. Teachers should also focus on the illustrations to reinforce comprehension.

At the end of the read-aloud, teachers may ask students to write their reflections and reactions to the story in a free-writing format. Students can share their writing with partners or in small groups, using their comments as a springboard for additional discussion.

Furthermore, text-exploitation activities can include choral readings, executed by dividing the class into groups and having them listen to and repeat the dialogue read by the teacher. Teachers can distribute character roles to groups of students, who then reenact the story while teachers serve as narrators. In a readers’ theater activity, students can come to the front of the room to read the part of an assigned character. Writing activities might include writing the “story before the story” or the follow-up to the end of the story. Role-playing and other dramatic activities can spin off from a simple read-aloud.

One book and 175 students

With large numbers of students, classroom arrangement is critical to the successful use of children’s picture storybooks. Teachers should move the focus of the class from the front to the middle of the room. Arrange the desks, or students seated on the floor, in concentric circles with the teacher in the middle.

When reading aloud, teachers should turn in a complete circle, holding the book high for all to see, as they reveal each illustration. This ensures that the maximum number of students see the majority of pictures in a timely manner. If possible, teachers should purchase the “big book” version of the children’s book. Usually 24-by-36 inches in size, this large format makes it easier for many students to see the text and illustrations.

Another option is to divide the class into groups of 25–30 students. After selecting one member from each group to be group leader, teachers train the leaders to read the book. Then each leader, one at a time, reads the book to his or her respective small group. Or teachers can have the leaders re-create the book, word-for-word, page-by-page, printing and sketching the book and then reading their re-created book to the small group while they wait for the “one book” to circulate to their group.

The conclusion of *Little Blue and Little Yellow* in Rwanda

When I finished reading this story to my first-year Rwandan students, they discussed it in small groups and then as a whole class. Time for dismissal was just minutes away. In one of those unpredictable teaching moments, I decided to wait a bit longer to see if anyone had anything more to say. Just as I prepared to say good-bye, a student raised his hand and said, “I think this story is written for the Rwandan people today. It even has the colors of the Rwandan flag—blue, yellow, and green.”

My decision to bring this book, and my students’ discovery of their own complex story within this simple text, are a reminder of the value of children’s picture storybooks in adult and adolescent EFL classrooms. The power of these texts lies in their universal appeal and the unpredictable reader responses they can engender. It is time for EFL teachers of adults and adolescents to explore them.

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